BOOK REVIEWS

The last few decades have seen a multitude of conflicts that were driven along ethnic and religious lines. The scale of these conflicts is no longer local in nature; they have assumed a global dimension. It seems on the outset that as societies become more diverse due to migration and technological advancements, social cohesion is stretched to its limits. Cantle (2012) calls this the "paradox of diversity". Simply stated, the more diverse a society becomes and as people are exposed to more differences, the tendency is to retreat into their comforting identities, embrace identity politics and support separatist ideologies. It would seem that identity brings comfort in a strange world of difference; and groups vying for influence and power in societies are too ready to exploit this for political gains.

Against this backdrop, multiculturalism has become a contested term. No one can dispute the fact of diversity. Every society has, in varying degree, different cultural groups and practices. In this sense, every society is necessarily multicultural. But multiculturalism is not just a factual description, but also a "normative response to that fact" (Parekh, 2006:6). According to Crowder (2013:2), "multiculturalists not only observe but also approve of the presence of multiple cultures within a single society and accord public recognition and support to those cultures." In addition, multiculturalism is also a political process to describe "a set of policies, the aim of which is to manage and institutionalize diversity by putting people into ethnic and cultural boxes, defining individual needs and rights by virtue of the boxes into which people are put, and using those boxes to shape public policy" (Malik, 2013: 8). Hence, multiculturalism is both a value-statement as well as a political process, which makes it controversial and contested. It is understandable that there is renewed interest in the concept since the term became current in the 1970s amidst a rising concern over identity politics,

particularly within Western liberal democracies (Taylor, 1992; Kymlicka, 2001; Modood, 2007).

This was amply captured in the proceedings of an international conference held in Mahidol University in 2016, and published as *Multiculturalism in Asia: Peace and Harmony*. A significant aspect of this volume is its focus on Asia, with papers discussing multiculturalism in the context of Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. The editor, Imtiyaz Yusuf, rightly identified a strand running through these Asian examples: how to accommodate ethno-cultural-religious differences, especially for minority groups, within a post-colonial nationalist narrative that might privilege one identity over another (p.4). At the personal level, one can adopt what Surin Pitsuwan calls "philosophical humility" (p.12). It involves recognizing one's incompleteness and hence, alludes to the need for *value pluralism*, a non-reductionist acknowledgement of multiple intrinsic goods – a concept associated with political theorist, Isaiah Berlin.

Indeed, much of the volume's focus is on ASEAN, which remains neglected in scholarly discussions on multiculturalism. This caucus of 10 Southeast Asian countries with a collective of population of 620 million population is most interesting. Buddhism features prominently in countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos; Islam as the majority religion in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei; and Philippines with a majority Catholic community. The region itself is historically known as a meeting point of four major world civilizations: Chinese, Indian, Arab and European. Yet, ASEAN holds multiple contradictions, as implicit in the volume's essays. These contradictions, however, were glossed over and lacking in analysis – the essays were largely celebratory in tone.

Yet, there are many lessons that can be derived from the case studies featured. Monera highlights the multi-faceted nature of the problem of diversity. It involves a matrix of material conditions, historical legacies and political questions that shape multicultural policies in the Philippines, particularly in Southern Mindanao among the Muslim minority. Developmental issue is one major concern. In Ahnaf's essay, he highlights the impact of development involving migration, capital and politics that put stresses on a multicultural Indonesia. Many local communities feel that they are being marginalized as a result of migration, particularly from the more skillful migrants supported by capital. As a result, local communities see themselves as 'foreigners' in their homelands and politicians are quick to capitalize on the situation by heightening religious and ethnic sentiments for electoral mobilization (p.129).

Nonetheless, one solution that runs as a common thread through the volume is the

revival of 'local wisdoms'. It involves "reproducing culture and memories of peace that live in many local communities" (p.138). Local wisdoms can be garnered through shared religious practices. Examples abound in the volume, such as the pilgrimage of Buddhists and Muslims to Śrī Pāda (Adam's Peak) in Sri Lanka; the Muslims' neighborly spirit in Kupang in Timor, Indonesia during the Christian festival of Easter; inter-ethnic marriages in Lasem in Central Java (often called 'Little China' of Indonesia); and syncretic Hindu festivals in Lahore, Pakistan. One can conclude that joint religious festivals often seal social bonds in traditional societies – something lost in highly urbanized societies.

Local wisdoms aside, leadership is another common thread. Ratanakul, highlights the example of Thailand's King Bhumipol's principled leadership. He introduced ten guiding principles for governance: generosity; high moral character; self-sacrifice; honesty or integrity; kindness and gentleness; austere self-control; non-anger; non-violence; patience; and non-deviation from righteousness and conformity to the low (p.38).Certainly, these are ideals. How they pan out in reality is a separate issue. While enlightened kingship is critical in monarchical societies, it is also pertinent to highlight that organic leaders at the grassroots level are needed in other instances. Ahnaf refers to a need for a "critical mass of peace enhancing leadership", a phrase he borrowed from Reychler (2006).

Despite the volume's attempt to posit a more positive narration of Asia's multiculturalism, one question remains: can peace prevail when states privilege one group over another, or when social relations remain unequal? Certainly, integration is different from inclusion and with different outcomes. One example is Malaysia's policy of integration. I am highly skeptical of Osman Bakar's notion of "ethnic grace" (p.92), which seems to imply the need for gratitude from non-Malays for their citizenry conferred by the state in postcolonial Malaysia. Implicit to this is an assumption of 'natural right to the land', which is different from the construction of citizenry in modern nation-states that is grounded on birthplace, long historical presence and communal contributions. One can certainly argue for a long historical presence of the other ethnic groups, such as the Indic-Sino-Malay trade interactions of the pre-colonial period. Nonetheless, Bakar is astute in identifying a troubling aspect of the Malaysian context: "mutual avoidance". It has proven to be a stumbling block to the development of positive inter-religious and inter-ethnic interactions beyond the superficial.

This brings us to another critique: the overrated use of the term "harmony". Often, harmony is understood as the absence of violent conflict. It is an uncritical appraisal of reality and underlying tensions that may persist in multicultural societies. More troubling is the use

of the term to maintain an unjust condition, upholding the status quo and ignoring inter- and intra-group tensions for fear of upsetting established power configurations. Harmony cannot be at the expense of justice. That is why Monera alludes to the concept of "inclusive peace", which "is not the silence of the cemetery; not even just the absence of conflict, but is comprehensive and holistic" (p.121). Inclusion is a pre-requisite for everlasting peace. Hence, Pitsuwan aptly questioned how we can "create a structure that would allow everyone a comfortable space inside?" (p.16). It is only through accommodating each other, having a better understanding of each other and appreciating the diversity among us while valuing the commonality between us, can we truly attain a peaceful society. For Pitsuwan, there is no other way.

Multiculturalism in Asia, therefore, generates more questions than answers. One glaring absence in the volume is a discussion on freedom of religion. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that freedom of religion "includes freedom to change his religion or belief"; and by extension, freedom from religion. How do multicultural states deal with non-mainstream ideas on religion, minority religious groups that do not feature in officially accepted categories, and atheistic beliefs? This is compounded with the fact that several countries have legislations criminalizing apostasy and blasphemy. The problem may lie in the uncritical celebration of multiculturalism comprising of strictly defined categories with rigid, static and non-porous boundaries. It is in fact not so much of multiculturalism but "plural monoculturalism" (Sen, 2006). Thus, multiculturalism does not naturally lead to harmony as long as multicultural policies does not, in Ahnaf's words, "make people 'safe from difference and safe for difference'" (p.139). Perhaps, multiculturalism is a spent force. Multiculturalism must now make way for a "pluralist transformation of public space, institutions and civic culture" and adopt a more accurate view that cultural boundaries are not fixed "but in state of flux and remaking" (Bloomfield & Bianchini, 2004). Beyond multiculturalism is what is now known as interculturalism. The "inter", after all, speaks more to the deep diversity found in all societies than what the "multi" can capture. This volume is hinting at this spirit, though limited in its treatment.

Reviewed by
Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taibi, Director
Centre for Interfaith Understanding (CIFU).

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